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Preliminary Comments on Gorbachev Press Conference

In his lengthy prepared remarks following the joint appearance with the President, General Secretary Gorbachev focused principally on security and arms control issues. Consistent with the populist image that he has tried to cultivate, Gorbachev stressed the theme that the Soviet leadership shared the aspirations of peoples everywhere for peace and a lessening of tensions. While giving a positive evaluation of the summit process, he also noted that the discussions were frank and lively ("at one point very, very lively"). He gave no indications that the USSR had altered its positions on arms control issues, and stressed the differences in the Soviet and US views of the origins of regional conflicts. He spoke from notes, but appeared to extemporize at times, and became particularly animated when discussing regional conflicts and the SDI. Among the major themes of his remarks were the following:

- US and Soviet Strategic Thinking. Gorbachev noted that the sides shared the premise that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. But he claimed to have great difficulty in understanding how the Administration views issues of war and peace, noting that the Soviet side had made "great efforts" to be "broad minded". He said that the USSR is not "angling for" military superiority, but that it is "logical" that the USSR could not allow the US to gain superiority. He said that confidence building, economic and security issues had to be considered in the context of equal security.
- SDI. Gorbachev showed no flexibility on SDI, although his remarks were general in nature, not dealing with the nuances of the limits of permissible activity. He claimed that if the arms race were to extend to outer space it would become irreversible. He rejected the US view that SDI is a defensive shield and said, "It is weapons that are going to be in outer space." He claimed that political leaders would not be able to control such weapons, which would be directed by computer. In the only part of his remarks that could be interpreted as criticism of the President, he claimed that he could not understand how the President as a political leader could be caught up in the SDI concept.

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- Other NST Issues. Gorbachev linked progress on other aspects of the nuclear and space talks directly to limits on SDI. He said the USSR was prepared for radical reductions in offensive systems "provided that the door to the arms race in space was firmly closed." He noted that the sides agreed on the concept of 50% reductions, but that their views of the systems to be reduced differed. He said, however, that the difference should not be "overdramatized" and that mutually acceptable solutions could be found if there were no arms race in space and if the concept of equal security were agreed.
- Verification. Gorbachev claimed that the Soviet position on verification had been distorted. He said that the USSR had the same interest as the US in verification of offensive force reductions and said that laboratories could be opened to inspection after a halt to SDI testing.
- Talks with Other Countries. Gorbachev claimed that in the context of negotiating radical reductions with the US, the USSR was prepared to appeal to other (unspecified) nuclear powers to take the reductions further.
- Regional Issues. Gorbachev agreed to a continued dialogue on regional problems, but rejected the "stupid remark" attributed to unnamed sources that "Moscow is to blame for everything." He characterized current regional problems as the legacy of history and the result of lack of economic freedom among regional states.

Comment:

Although little new substance was obvious, Gorbachev's statements were sufficiently general to hold open the possibility of some flexibility in the future. Possible areas for movement include the limits of permissible SDI research, the composition of aggregate forces to be reduced and perhaps verification. The offer to extend talks to other nuclear powers may portend an offer of discussions with China, as well as the UK and France. Above all, Gorbachev appeared to be most interested in creating an image of willingness to deal, and placing the onus on the US--in particular the President's personal commitment to SDI--for the lack of more concrete results.

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